

Field Report

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

■ 1.0 Summary

The Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (CVNRA) is located just south of Cleveland, Ohio, enveloping 22 miles of the Cuyahoga River. Twenty-five years ago, Congress designated the site as a NPS unit; the Park receives an estimated 3.5 million visitors per year. There are three features, which vertically traverse the site all within a short distance of one another – the Ohio & Erie National Historic Corridor, the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, and the Cuyahoga River.

Due to the dispersed locations of most activities and programs, Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) have the potential to improve the visitor experience, better manage the flow of visitors, and reduce the level of automobile traffic without reducing visitation. There are many options available to pursue, including enhancements to existing facilities and the creation of new systems for bus and shuttle services, bicycle and pedestrian routes, tourist trolleys, rail systems, and intelligent transportation systems. The key options for ATS are highlighted below.

- Expansion of the route and services for the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad will occur over time as the Ohio & Erie National Historic Corridor is more fully developed. Additional financial subsidies to the railroad could permit greater numbers of passengers to afford traveling by rail and experience the CVNRA by a means other than private automobile.
- Bus service from the neighboring cities of Akron and Cleveland could be expanded and include bus stations accessing trails along the east and west borders of the CVNRA. Ideally the buses should be equipped with bike racks.
- In the long run, a tourist shuttle service could be implemented which would run circular routes through the CVNRA. Two shuttles could run different loops to distribute visitors to different sections of the Park and reduce the chances for large concentrations of visitors. Environmental and historical information could be provided by a ranger or volunteer during the trip.
- A separate transit shuttle system could transport visitors and staff to and from remote parking lots within the CVNRA to major trailheads and visitor facilities.
- The bicycle network within the CVNRA could be extended to neighboring communities to facilitate access to the CVNRA. The network could link several communities and facilitate travel for pedestrians as well as bicyclists.

- The possibility of a tourist trolley in the region may be feasible as tourism increases due to the development of the Ohio & Erie National Historic Corridor.
- An advanced traveler information system with real-time information from the Park linked to the CVNRA Web site and the state tourist information telephone could provide programming, weather, transit, and road conditions to potential visitors.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (CVNRA) is located in northeastern Ohio in the North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor along the Cuyahoga River (see Figures 1 and 2). Cleveland, Ohio is located five miles to the north. Akron borders the southern edge of the CVNRA. There are 15 local jurisdictions surrounding the CVNRA, including Valley View, Garfield Heights, Maple Heights, and Bedford to the north; Walton Hills, Sagamore Hills, Northfield Center, and Boston Heights to the east; Akron along the south; and Independence, Brecksville, Boston, Richfield, Peninsula, and Bath on the west. The CVNRA lies in two counties, Cuyahoga County and Summit County, and falls into three Congressional districts.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (CVNRA) is an urban park of the NPS. Congress established the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area in December 1974. The NPS manages the CVNRA in cooperation with other agencies that own property within the NPS boundaries, including Cleveland Metro Parks and Summit County Metro Parks.

In 1996, the Ohio and Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor was created. The 87-mile Corridor follows the route of the former Ohio and Erie Canal and extends from Cleveland to Zoar. The CVNRA comprises 25 percent of corridor land. The historic corridor passes through several cities, including:

- Cleveland to the north;
- Akron to the south;
- Massillon (40 miles from CVNRA);
- Canton (46 miles from CVNRA); and
- Zoar (55 miles from CVNRA).

Figure 1.

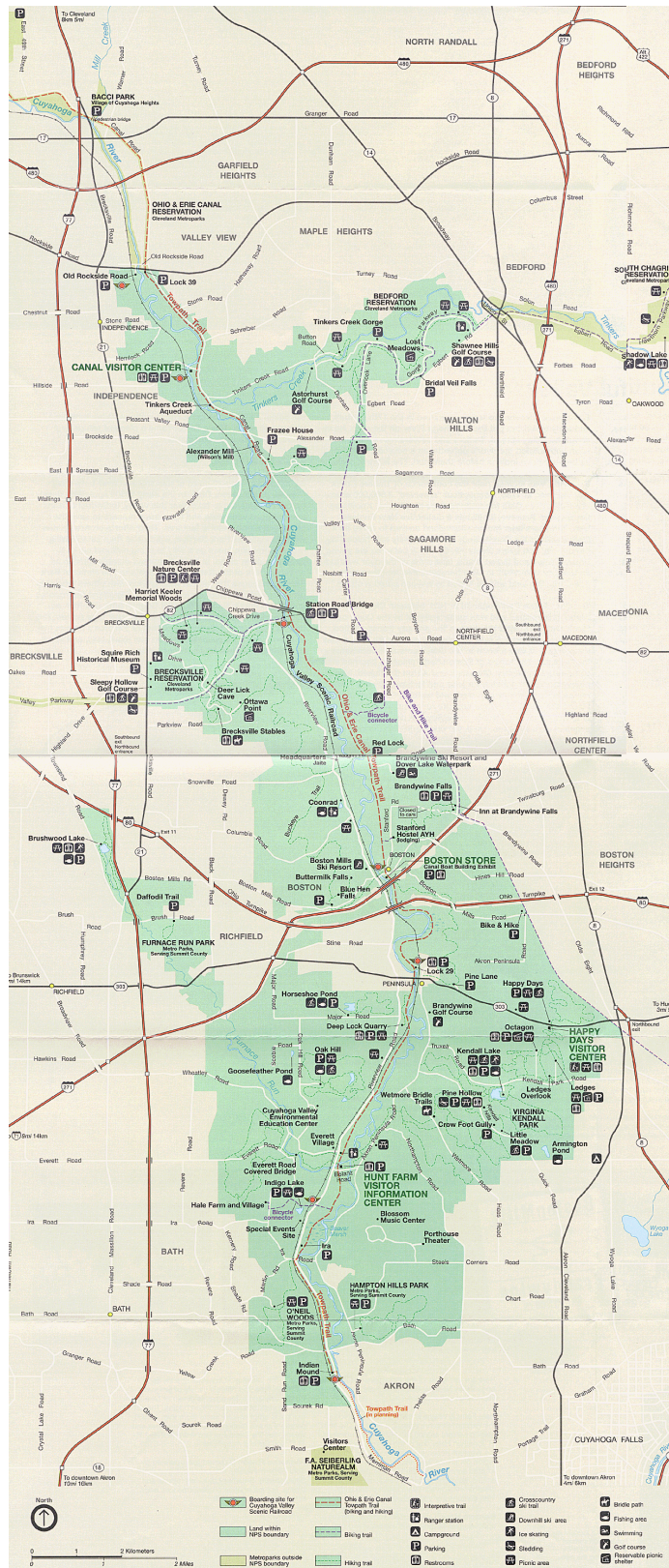


Figure 2.



2.3 Physical Description

The CVNRA site covers 33,000 acres, running along 22 miles of the Cuyahoga River. The NPS owns 19,000 acres; almost 10 percent is owned privately, and the remaining one-third is owned by the Cleveland and Akron Park agencies. The river, mountains, scenic railroad, and trails serve as the major visitor attractions. There are three major linear connectors running north-south within a short distance of one other – the canal, the railroad, and the scenic byway. Each are described in greater detail later in the report.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the Site

The CVNRA was established for the purpose of preserving the public use and enjoyment of 33,000 acres of rural valley landscape between the Cleveland and Akron urban areas. The CVNRA’s enabling act, Public Law 93-555, states that the recreational area should be managed “in a manner which will preserve its scenic, natural, and historic setting while providing for the recreational and educational needs of the visiting public.”

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The site had an estimated 3.5 million visitors in 1998 and is one of the 15 most visited national parks in the United States. Peak visitation occurs from April through October, with a moderate peak in the winter from seasonal activities like cross-country and downhill skiing. Visitation is higher on weekends than weekdays. About half of the visitors are walkers, runners, and cyclists using the Ohio and Erie Canal Towpath Trail (see Figures 3

and 4), a 20-mile trail that follows the historic route of the Canal through the Cuyahoga Valley. The CVNRA is accessible 24 hours a day and gets many visitors during the evening. Approximately 90 percent of visitors come from within the region and about 90 percent are repeat visitors. According to a visitor survey completed in 1998, most visitors expressed a high level of satisfaction with the Park facilities and visitor services in general.

Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Due to the size of the CVNRA and the diverse and numerous activities available, visitation is highly scattered throughout the site. A typical visit lasts two to five hours, and is

often focused on one activity, such as a hike or a special event. To visit and experience the entire site, a visitor would require several days. There are a bed and breakfast and a youth hostel within the CVNRA boundaries. Camping is not permitted in the CVNRA, but there are facilities nearby. Most visitors from outside the region do not stay overnight unless they are combining their visit to the CVNRA with another visitor attraction in the area like Sea World or the Cleveland Metro Parks Zoo.

The CVNRA anticipates that visitation will continue to increase over time, although no definitive visitor projections have been calculated.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Situated between two major urban areas, the CVNRA has a wide range of transportation issues associated with it. In spite of the high level of visitors, a 1998 Park survey indicated that 76 percent of visitors believe the walkways, trails, and roads to be in “very good” condition.

Some of the key transportation issues are as follows:

- **Railroad** – Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad provides excursion passenger rail service along the 26-mile stretch from Independence to downtown Akron, extending through the length of the CVNRA (see Figures 5 and 6). The NPS has a cooperative agreement with the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railway Corporation, a non-profit organization. The NPS owns and maintains the trackage and the right-of-way from the northern edge of the CVNRA to downtown Akron. The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad owns the railroad and operates the service. The 10 vintage rail cars were built between 1939 and 1940, provide a climate-controlled atmosphere, and carry up to 800 passengers. Train speeds vary between 10 to 25 mph to allow for scenic viewing. Bikes are permitted on the trains, but only two percent of passengers bring them.

The railroad has a \$1 million operating budget that is paid primarily from farebox revenues. The NPS also provides the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad with a \$50,000 annual subsidy; in addition, the CVSR is engaged in active fundraising. Round-trip adult tickets vary in price from \$9.00 to \$20, based on distance, time, amenities, and program. Children tickets range from \$7.00 to \$12. According to the 1993 Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad Master Plan the following resulted in a net income of \$35,800:

- Capital costs, estimated at close to \$10 million;
- Income, based on ticket sales (\$1.4 million) and concession, sales, subsidies, and other revenue (\$0.2 million), totaled \$1.6 million; and
- Operating expenses, estimated at \$1.6 million.

Figure 5.



Figure 6.



The Cuyahoga County's concept plan proposes extending train service north into downtown Cleveland, doubling the length of service. However, the Scenic Railroad does not wish to use their line for commuter rail service. Commuter rail served the community for many years but ceased in the 1960s.

- **East-West Connections** – The concept plan acknowledges that “due to the linear configuration of the Corridor, connectors need to be an essential feature of future projects in order to create a unifying image for the area and its resources.” The need to

strengthen the east-west connectors remains significant in both current and future planning efforts.

- **Roads** – The roads in the CVNRA fall under the jurisdiction of several owners, including county, municipality, and state. The CVNRA only owns the roads that access the CVNRA facilities, the railroad crossings, and the bridge crossings. The major roads through the site belong to the other agencies. As a result, the CVNRA cannot receive funding for road improvements from the FHWA Federal Lands Highway Program. However, the CVNRA can provide matching funds for up to a maximum of \$250,000 a year for local road projects, which are sponsored by non-Federal agencies.

The Ohio & Erie Canal State Scenic Byway, which parallels the towpath and roughly covers the path of the original canal, was designated one of the state's first scenic byways by the governor of Ohio two years ago. The designation provides some funding for visitor amenities, historic preservation, and signage along the 110-mile byway, which begins in Cleveland and ends at I-77 in Dover.

- **Minimal Traffic Congestion** – Despite the proximity of large population centers, the CVNRA is fortunate to have minimal congestion associated with the site. Crowding occurs under prime conditions, such as nice weather on summer weekends, and for special events like musical programs at the Blossom Music Center. At these times, there is an increase in accidents, visitors do experience some congestion on local and CVNRA roads, and parking lots reach capacity. However, if visitors cannot find parking in the first lot they try, they will simply move on to a nearby open lot.
- **Commuters** – The CVNRA does have to contend with commuter traffic as there are major routes running east-west through the site, including Interstate Routes 77, 80, and 271; State Routes 303 and 82; and local surface streets, like Canal Street.
- **Parking** – There are many parking lots in the CVNRA; capacity varies from six parking spaces to 125. Most lots hold 20 to 40 cars (see Figures 7 and 8). Some cars park along the sides of the roads, especially when visitation is high. Ten of the parking locations are located at points along the towpath.
- **Trails** – Over 125 miles of trails currently exist within the site. There are plans underway to link the towpaths along the entire length of the Corridor, resulting in an 87-mile-long link. Currently about 40 miles of the towpath are developed as trails. The towpath is owned by several public agencies. Approximately 1.6 million walkers, runners, bicyclists, and others use the towpath each year.
- **River** – The Cuyahoga River and its major tributaries, Big Creek and Mill Creek do experience some recreational use, but it is not encouraged due to poor water quality. The Cuyahoga River does not currently serve any major transportation function.
- **Canal** – The Ohio and Erie Canal was originally constructed in 1825-1832, the first canal west of the Appalachian Mountains. The canal parallels the Cuyahoga River and draws some of its water from the river. The canal does not serve any transportation or recreational function other than providing lock demonstrations and educational history to visitors.

Figure 7.



Figure 8.



- **Bicycling** – The CVNRA is very scenic and highly desirable for bicyclists. Many communities would like to connect their community to the CVNRA bike network. Currently Metro Parks sponsors a bike and hike trail of 27 miles that is highly successful; it accesses points along the CVNRA on its western border.

- **Public Transit** – The Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) and the Akron Transit system run transit buses along the east and west sides of the CVNRA. The Cleveland RTA does not serve the CVNRA. The Akron transit system introduced a weekend bus service in the fall of 1999 which connects to the scenic railroad and is equipped with bicycle racks. It is still too soon to assess how successful the service is.
- **Bus Tours** – In the past, bus tours of the Park have been run in the fall months. A Park ranger explains and interprets the site for the visitors. The service is not publicized. School buses also frequent the CVNRA transporting students for educational and recreational outings.
- **Bus Parking** – The CVNRA does provide bus parking; in addition, there are large lots with sufficient space to accommodate buses. In most cases, the number of tour and school buses does not merit increasing the availability of parking. However, the town of Peninsula does need bus parking and none is available. Buses are forced to drive on local roads until temporary or long-term parking accommodations are found.
- **Ski Shuttle** – The operator of the privately owned Boston Mills Ski Resort and the Brandywine Ski Resort provides a shuttle service between the sites in the winter ski season. No service is provided in the off-season months.
- **ADA Accessibility** – The towpath trail, visitor centers, two fishing decks, and several activities are all accessible to people with disabilities. Additional information is available to the public about site accessibility.
- **Access from Outside the Region** – There are airports, intracity bus terminals, and passenger rail service provided by Amtrak to the cities of Akron and Cleveland; however, transit connections from these stations to the CVNRA are limited.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Two communities in particular, Boston Township and Peninsula, are strongly affected by the presence of the CVNRA. About 80 percent of the taxable property of Boston Township is contained within the CVNRA boundaries. The community of Peninsula is surrounded by CVNRA land. Peninsula is a historic village and provides amenities, like bike rental and restaurants, for CVNRA visitors. Because of the unique location of these towns, changes in CVNRA visitation and transportation patterns to the CVNRA would significantly impact Boston and Peninsula residents and businesses.

In 1996, several organizations came together to develop the Ohio and Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor (NHC) to commemorate the canal and its history and increase its attractiveness to neighboring communities and tourists. It is one of only 16 in the nation. The Corridor follows the route of the former Ohio and Erie Canal, includes the entire CVNRA site, and extends 87 miles from the waterfront of Cleveland to the downtown of Zoar. The Corridor passes through the communities of Massillon, Canton, and Akron, and the CVNRA. The plans concerning the NHC caused the NPS management to rethink development and integration issues of the CVNRA and expand their planning focus.

Congress established the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor in 1996, providing \$10 million in funding to develop and connect the Corridor elements. The Corridor is administered by CVNRA staff. The Corridor is unique in that it is the only NHC with a national park at its core. The agencies involved are in the process of developing the Heritage Corridor Management Plan, which should be available in January 2000. The Plan will stipulate that the NPS must be asked to help and partner in any activities or efforts to promote the NHC. Federal funds are available to the national heritage corridors, but local matching funds are required as well.

The CVNRA has a historic property leasing program, which allows them to maintain the historic structures in the CVNRA boundaries, like the bed and breakfast, and generate a limited amount of revenue.

The location of the Park between two major urban centers, results in tremendous development pressures. For example, a developer recently proposed a mega mall in the community of Boston Heights. The site currently serves as a privately owned golf course. The mayor of Boston Heights opposes the plan, as does the NPS management. Several neighboring communities are also seeking to increase development. Significant amounts of commercial development will increase traffic in the areas surrounding the site and could negatively affect the CVNRA. Residential development near the CVNRA is increasing as people wish to live near the recreation area to enjoy its scenic views and unique features.

In some cases, the NPS has acquired land within the surrounding communities, thereby reducing the town's tax base. However, the town is still responsible for the provision of services, including road maintenance leading into the Park, and therefore the situation can be financially disadvantageous to the town.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Native Americans have influenced the region for hundreds of generations. They gave the river its name, Cuyahoga, which means crooked. The Cuyahoga River was an important transportation route for American Indians who first inhabited the area nearly 12,000 years ago. There are several archeological sites throughout the Valley.

The CVNRA contains over 250 structures, many of which have historic significance either to Native Americans or later residents. Over six dozen of these structures are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The CVNRA is able to maintain some of the structures themselves; others are maintained through a property leasing program, through which private owners lease and maintain the structures according to specific maintenance requirements.

The site is fortunate to have a significant diversity of flowers from many different regions of North America. This is due to the unique setting and former presence of glaciers in the region, which molded the Valley's environment. The Cuyahoga River is itself a unique feature of the site, having served generations of human and animal populations. There are approximately 350 species of wildlife found in the CVNRA, including 231 species of birds.

3.4 Recreational Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The CVNRA hosts a large range of recreational activities. There are no admission fees to the CVNRA or its regular programs, but donation boxes are available. Visitors can partake in the following activities, including:

- Hiking, biking, horseback riding, and ranger-led walks on more than 125 miles of CVNRA maintained trails.
- Riding the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad through the site.
- Fishing in the CVNRA's several ponds.
- Golfing at one of the four public golf courses.
- Picnicking at one of several locations scattered throughout the CVNRA.
- Winter activities, including cross country skiing, downhill skiing, sledding, snowboarding, and snow shoeing. The Kendall Lake Winter Sports Center offers programs and information to visitors on winter weekends.
- Enjoying scenery, including the CVNRA's National Natural Landmark and Tinkers Creek Gorge.
- Attending special programs, including musical events at the Blossom Music Center. The facility is privately owned and located in the southern part of the CVNRA. It has a seating capacity of 20,000.
- Visiting historic points of interest and interpretive visitor centers, including Canal Visitor Center, which exhibits the history of the Valley and Canal and provides canal lock demonstrations on a seasonal basis (see Figure 9 for a view of the canal); Boston Store, a restored historic structure with an interactive museum describing the canal boat construction; Frazee House; Happy Days Visitor Center; and the Hunter Farm Visitor Center. All five sites display exhibits on the history of the Cuyahoga Valley.

Water sports, including swimming, boating, canoeing, and kayaking are not encouraged because of the variable water quality of the Cuyahoga River. Therefore, there are no canoeing, kayaking, or other water craft rentals within the CVNRA boundaries.

Figure 9.



■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

Currently, much of the planning centers on the development of NHC. Key planning documents are scheduled for completion in the beginning of 2000. Existing planning documents for the CVNRA include its General Management Plan, adopted in July 1977, and its Statement for Management, which is schedule for updating every two years. Planning documents from the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, including their 1994 Master Plan, also provide context and support for the CVNRA's planning efforts.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The NPS manages the Park and its programs in cooperation with other organizations that own property within its boundaries or support the CVNRA's activities. These organizations and agencies include:

- Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor organizations, which are planning and investigating increased opportunities to develop the tourist economy over the 87-mile Corridor between Cleveland and Zoar;
- Cuyahoga Valley Association, a non-profit citizen's support group and the official Park "Friends" group;

- Cleveland Metro Parks, a municipal agency that manages properties within the CVNRA and serves as a member of the National Heritage Corridor;
- Summit County Metro Parks, a county agency that manages several properties within the CVNRA. Metro Parks is also a member of the National Heritage Corridor;
- Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, the only rail service provided through the CVNRA site;
- Western Reserve Historical Society, which manages the Hale Farm and Village and its 1848 “living history town”;
- Blossom Music Center, a privately owned site within the CVNRA boundaries, which holds outdoor summer performances; and
- Dover Lake Water Park, a privately owned enterprise that hosts several water and summer activities.

There are several other NPS sites in the state, including the James A. Garfield National Historic Site in Cleveland.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

Due to the dispersed locations of most activities and programs, ATS have the potential to improve the visitor experience, better manage the flow of visitors, and reduce the level of private vehicles without reducing the level of visitation. There are many options available to pursue, including enhancements to existing facilities and the creation of new systems, such as bus and shuttle systems, bicycle and pedestrian routes, tourist trolleys and rail systems, and intelligent transportation systems.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

Options for ATS for the Cuyahoga Valley CVNRA, include the following:

Scenic Railroad

- The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad serves as both a tourist attraction and an alternative for traveling through and visiting the Corridor. Subsidies for operating costs and capital improvements to the railroad could allow the railroad to reduce the cost of the passenger ticket and increase utilization. Currently, passenger tickets cost between \$10 and \$20. Additional service will be provided as the NHC is more fully developed,

the infrastructure is set in place, and the region experiences increased tourism from which the railroad can draw additional passengers.

Bus Service

- Transit service by bus from the cities of Akron and Cleveland could include pick up and drop off at several CVNRA entry points. The buses should be equipped with bicycle racks to encourage multimodal transfer and make it as easy as possible for visitors to experience the CVNRA using non-motorized transport.

Shuttle

- In the longer term, the CVNRA could operate a tourist shuttle service, which would run loops through different sections of the CVNRA. In this way, the shuttles could distribute visitors and reduce opportunities for large concentrations of visitors. Two small shuttles could operate and service different routes in the Park. Well marked maps and pick up and drop off points for the two services could be provided to facilitate use and allow for visitors to get out and experience the site on foot as well. A ranger or volunteer could provide history or educational information on the CVNRA simultaneously. As demand for the service increases, additional routes could be added serviced by additional shuttles to keep visitors dispersed across the CVNRA.
- Buses and shuttles could be used on an occasional basis to transport visitors to special events from parking locations in the neighboring communities, including programs at the Blossom Music Center, which serves as the summer home of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. This would reduce the amount of traffic within the site, reduce the environmental impacts caused by the large numbers of automobiles, and help visitors to consider accessing the CVNRA by modes other than automobile in the future.
- The NPS staff and the Akron Metro are discussing the feasibility of a transit shuttle to transport visitors and staff to and from remote parking lots within the CVNRA to major trailheads and visitor facilities. The Cleveland RTA could operate similar services.

Bicycle and Pedestrian

- Extensions of the towpath and trails in the CVNRA could be extended to neighboring communities to facilitate access to the CVNRA and use of the site by bicycle or foot. Ideally, the paths and trails should link several features, a range of environments, and several neighborhoods. The cities of Cleveland and Akron secured ISTEAF funds and are already building extensions to their communities from the CVNRA towpath. A bikeway was proposed as part of a concept plan developed by the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission, which would connect with other bike routes, residential and business neighborhoods in Cleveland, and recreational and tourist attractions (e.g., zoo). Bike paths and trails should tie into the State of Ohio's Lakefront Bikeway and the CVNRA Towpath Trail.

- Bikes are permitted on the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad and loaded into a designated car of the train (see Figure 10), however, the option has not been widely promoted, and many visitors are unaware of the option. As the railroad is extended, this option should be promoted as it allows for a scenic and environmentally friendly way to experience the CVNRA and the region.

Figure 10.



Tourist Trolley

- The Cuyahoga County Planning Commission's Concept Plan also proposed a trolley transportation system to help ease traffic congestion, and serve as a regional tourist attraction. This option could be considered for long-term implementation once other shuttle services achieve capacity and the demand for tourist services of this type warrant the capital investment. Its service could include points within the CVNRA.

ITS Traveler Information System

- Visitors to the CVNRA would benefit from a traveler information system to provide programming, weather, and road conditions to potential visitors. The information could be provided via the NPS Web site and linked to the state tourist information telephone line, 1-800-BUCKEYE, serving as a traveler information system for visitors with real-time information on CVNRA resources, programs, facilities, transit services, parking conditions, and congestion levels.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, map and visitor materials.

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Visitor Survey Card Data Report, 1998.

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Transportation Study, March 1981.

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Interpretive Prospectus, December 1988.

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area General Management Plan, July 1977.

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area Statement for Management, National Parks Service, June 1993.

Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area Web sites,
www.recreation.gov/detail.cfm?ID=857 and www.nps.gov/cuva.

Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad Master Plan, ca. 1994.

North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor (concept plan), Cuyahoga County Planning Commission, February, 1992.

Ohio Department of Transportation Web site, www.dot.state.oh.us.

■ 7.0 Interviews

John Debo, Park Superintendent, Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

Dennis Hamm, Management Assistant, Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

David Humphrey, Chief of Technical Assistance and Professional Services, Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

Brian McHugh, Chief Ranger, Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

Jenny Vasarhelyi, Chief of Interpretation, Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

Doug Hillmer, National Parks Service

Tom Fritsch, Planner, Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study

Ken Hanson, Technical Director, Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study